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GENERAL DEVENS.

AN

ORATION

DELIVERED IN BOSTON SEPTEMBER 17, 1877,

AT THE DEDICATION OF THE

SOLDIERS AND SAILORS' MONUMENT,

ON BOSTON COMMON.

BY

CHARLES DEVENS.

[Press of Rockwell and Churchill]

BOSTON:
PRIVATELY PRINTED.

1877.

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BOSTON:
PRESS OF ROCKWELL AND CHURCHILL.

ORATION.



Mr. Mayor, Fellow-Citizens, and Comrades:—

On the anniversary of a day thrice memorable, as that of the first settlement of this town in 1630; as that of the adoption of the Constitution of the United States in 1789; as that of a great battle fought for the Union on the soil of Maryland in 1862 (the victorious commander in which is to-day among our most honored and illustrious guests), we have assembled to dedicate this Monument to the memory of the brave who fell in that great conflict, which, commencing for the unity of the government, broadened and deepened into one for the equal rights of all men. Before we part, some words should be spoken seeking to express, however inadequately, our gratitude to those to whom it is devoted. Yet our ceremonial will be but vain and empty if its outward acts are not the expressions of feelings deeper than either acts or words. Its true dedication is to be found in the emotions which have been kindled by the occasion itself, and to which every heart has yielded. Here in this city, the capital of Massachusetts, a State from which more than sixty gallant regiments were sent to the field under the inspiration of her illustrious Governor, who now himself sleeps

with those whom he sent forth to battle, we seek to surrender by this solemn act, from the age that is passing to the ages that are coming, for eternal memory and honor, the just fame of those who have died for the Union.

This is no Monument to the glories of war. While great changes for good have been wrought, and great steps taken toward liberty and civilization, by the convulsive energies exhibited in wars, these are but exceptions to the great rule that, of all the causes which have degraded nations, opposed human progress, and oppressed industry, war has been one of the worst. If this were its object, it were better far that the stones which compose it had slumbered in their native quarries. No pomp and circumstance, no waving of banners, no dancing of plumes, can lend to war true dignity. This is to be found alone in a great and noble cause.

Nor is this a Monument to valor only. There is something honorable in the true soldier, who, resolutely hazarding life, stands for the flag he follows; but there is that which is higher and nobler here. Among the finest monuments of Europe is that which is found in the beautiful valley of Lucerne, to the memory of the Swiss Guard who fell around Louis XVI., when the furious mob had stormed his palace. Placed in a niche of the limestone cliff, of which it forms a part, a lion pierced with a spear still holds in his death-grip the shield on which are carved the arms of the Bourbon. Few works of art are more majestic, or more fully show the hand of the master. It is courage only that it honors, and you wonder at the power which has so

ennobled and dignified it, when the great idea of patriotism was wanting. The Swiss, whom it commemorates, simply did bravely the work which they had contracted to do, when the subjects of the king, whose bread they had eaten, and whose wine they had drank, deserted him. The men whom we commemorate were brave as these, yet their place in history is not with them. It is with the soldiers of liberty, who have fallen a willing sacrifice for country with patriotic devotion. It is with the Swiss, who, at Sempach or Morgarten, in defence of their own freedom, broke the power of the House of Austria, and not with the mercenaries whom they have sent to fight the battles of Europe.

The sentiment of this Monument is patriotism. The men whom it honors were soldiers, courageous to the death; but it is their cause which sets them apart, for just honor and commendation, among the millions who have laid down their lives upon the battle-field. Patriotism such as theirs is the highest of civic virtues, the noblest form of heroism. Those who perilled their lives in obedience to its promptings could gain no more than those who remained at home in inglorious ease; and yet they laid aside their hopes of comfort, to die for us. That the government they had lived under might be preserved, that the just and equal rights of all men might be maintained, they encountered disease, danger, and death, in all the horrid forms in which they present themselves to every one who takes his place in the ranks of an army, with the solemn belief that in no other way could they discharge the obligation imposed upon them by their birthright as citizens of a free country. What-

ever might be its difficulties and dangers, their path was so clearly indicated that they deemed they could not err in following it. When they fought and fell they could not know but that their efforts would be in vain, and the great flag, the symbol of our united sovereignty, be rent asunder; but they were ready to risk all, and to dare all, in the effort to deserve success.

They were animated by no fierce fire of ambition; no desire to exalt themselves; no expectation of attaining those rewards which are gained by great chieftains. They had no such hopes. They knew well that all the honor they could obtain was that general meed of praise awarded to all who serve faithfully, but which would not separate them from others who had been brave and true. No doubt, as the blood of youth was high in their veins, they looked forward, in some instances, to the stern joy of the conflict; but beyond and above its tempest, fire, and smoke, they beheld and strove for the great objects of the contest.

To-day they have seemed to come again as when they moved out in serried lines, with the flag which they went to defend waving above their heads. Again we have seemed to see them, their faces lighted with patriotic enthusiasm, and we have recalled the varied scenes of their stern and manly service, which was to end in a soldier's death for the country to which they had devoted themselves; in each and every fortune patient and determined, staining their cause with no weakness or cowardice, dishonoring it by no baseness or cruelty.

When we reflect how little our system of education is calculated to adapt men to the restraints of military service, how inconsistent its largeness and freedom is with that stern control which necessarily marks a system intended to give a single mind the power which is embodied in thousands of men, we may well wonder at the ready submission which was always given to its exactions. To some the possession of marked military qualities, adapting them to control others, gave prominence; to some mere accidents of time or circumstance may have given high commands, while others, not less worthy, filled only their places, and did their duty in the ranks. But those who led must often have felt that their highest desire should be to be worthy of the devotion of those who followed. The distinctions necessary to discipline have long since passed away. Side by side, on fields bought by their blood, "no useless coffins around their breasts," but wrapped in the blanket which is the soldier's martial shroud, awaiting the coming of the Eternal Day, they rest together.

What matter is it while men have given of their utmost in intellect, strength, and courage, and of their blood to the last drop, whether they fell with the stars of the general, the eagles of the colonel, on their shoulders, or in the simple jacket of the private? Wherever "on fame's eternal camping-ground their silent tents are spread," in the tangled wildwood, in the stately cemetery, or in nameless graves, not even marked by the word "unknown," the earth that bears them dead bears not alive more true or noble men. To-day we remember them all, without regard to rank or race,

seeking to honor those whom we cannot by name identify.

If we do not commend patriotism such as these men exhibited, to whom are we to turn in the hour of danger which may come to those who are to succeed us, as it did to ourselves? Lessons such as they have given are not to be idly neglected when the time is gone when their services have ceased to be of immediate value. We shall not need to go to Marathon and Plataea for examples, whose brethren have shed their blood on fields as fiercely contested as those; and it would be idle to go anywhere for examples, unless, in rendering homage to the valor and patriotism displayed by our brethren, we seek to reconsecrate ourselves to the same virtues. Every instinct of justice calls upon us for the appropriate meed of praise, every suggestion of wisdom counsels that we omit no opportunity to instil into others the admiration with which their deeds are regarded. The fables of romance, which, in some form, each nation of Europe has, that in great emergencies their illustrious chiefs will return again to rescue them, are not altogether myths. To each people that loves bravery and patriotism come again in their hour of trial the old heroic souls, although the form and garb they wear is of their present age and time.

The time for natural tears has passed. To every heart the years have brought their new store of joys and sorrows, since these men made their great sacrifice for country. The structure that we have reared stands to honor, and not to mourn, the dead. So shall it stand when we in our turn are gone, to teach its lesson of duty nobly

done, at the expense of life itself, to those who are in turn to take upon themselves the duties of life.

Those whose names it honors were known and loved by us, and are not to be recalled but with that manly sorrow born of respect and love. There are those also to whom they were even nearer and dearer than to us, who knew them as comrades, whose homes are forever darkened by the absence of the light of affection which their presence shed around them. But the age comes swiftly on which is to know them only by their deeds. We commend them to the grave and impartial tribunal of history as patriotic and devoted citizens; we invoke the considerate judgment of the world upon the justice of their cause; we renew and reiterate the assertion that there was a solemn duty laid upon them by their time, their place, their country, and that such duty they met and performed. To them, as to the Spartans who fell around their king in stern defence of the liberties of Greece, changing but the name of the battle-field, apply the words which Simonides uttered: —

Of those who at Thermopylæ were slain,
 Glorious the doom and beautiful the lot,
 Their tomb an altar, men from tears refrain,
 Honor and praise, but mourn them not.

Although this Monument may often be passed as a thing of custom, although the lesson which it teaches may seem to be forgotten, yet in the hour of trial, if it is to come to others as it came to us, it will be freshly remembered. As in the Roman story which tells of Hannibal, the mightiest enemy Rome ever knew, it is

related that his father, Hamilear, himself a chieftain and a warrior, whose renown has been eclipsed by that of his greater son, brought him when a child of nine years old into the Temple of the Gods, that he might lift his little hands to swear eternal hostility to the tyranny of Rome: so shall those who succeed us come here to swear hostility, not to one grasping power only, but to every tyranny that would enslave the body or enchain the mind of man, and eternal devotion to the great principles of civil and religious liberty.

Nor is this Monument, while it asserts our belief in the fidelity of these men, in any sense unkind or ungenerous towards those with whom they were engaged in deadly strife. It bears no words of boasting or unseemly exultation, and the assertion of the justice of their cause, though firmly made, is yet not made in any harsh or controversial spirit. We recognize fully that those with whom they warred were our countrymen; we know their valor and determination; we know that no foot of ground was yielded to us until to hold it became impossible, and that they resisted until men and means utterly and hopelessly failed. Whatever we may think of their cause, that as a people they believed in it cannot fairly be questioned. Men do not sacrifice life and property without stint or measure except in the faith that they are right. Upon individuals we may charge unreasonable temper, intolerance, passion, and the promptings of a selfish and ill-regulated ambition; but the whole body of a people do not act from motives thus personal, and have a right to have their bravery and sincerity admitted, even if more cannot be conceded.

The great conflict was fought out and the victory won which has established forever, if the force of arms can establish anything, that the Republic is one and indivisible, and amid the roar of battle and the clash of arms the institution of slavery, which divided us as a nation, which made of the States two classes diverse and discordant, has passed away. Perhaps, if we had fully known all that it was to cost, both at the North and South, we should have hesitated more than we did before engaging in a strife so deadly and terrible. Yet, as we consider all the woes which must have followed the dismemberment of the Union, as we contemplate the vast gain for peace, freedom, and equality by the emancipation of the subject race from slavery and the dominant race itself from the corrupting influence of this thralldom, who shall say that we have any right to deplore the past except with mitigated grief? We are yet too near the events through which we were swept upon the bloody currents of the war to appreciate their full extent and magnitude, or all the consequences which are to flow from them. We know already that we enter upon a higher plane of national life, when it is established that there are no exceptions to the great rules of liberty among men, and that each is entitled to the just rewards of his labor and the position to which his talents, ability, and virtue entitle him. As we stand here in memory of our gallant dead, we urge upon all who have contended with them to unite with us in the effort to make of our new and regenerated government, purified by the fires of our civil conflict, a Republic more noble and more august than its founders had dared to hope.

Among all patriotic men there is everywhere an earnest desire that there shall be full peace and reconciliation between the sections of the Union. Whatever may have been former divisions, there is nothing in the events of the past, there is nothing in the present condition of things, which should forbid this. We can stand, firmly and securely stand, upon that which has been definitely settled by the war. Ours was not a mere conflict of dynasties, or of families, like the English wars of the Roses, in which the great Houses of York and Lancaster disputed the English Crown. It was a great elemental conflict, in which two opposite systems of civilization were front to front and face to face. It was necessary that one or the other should conquer, and that it should be settled whether the continent should be all free or all slave. Yet the history of civil wars demonstrates that the widest and saddest differences of religion, the most radical differences as to the form of government, have not prevented firm union when the cause of dissension was obliterated.

Now that it is determined that Union is to exist, it must be rendered one of mutual respect and regard, as well as of mutual interest. Unless this is the case there is no cohesive pressure of either internal or external force strong enough to maintain it. There must have been a party victorious and a party vanquished; but there is no true victory anywhere unless the conclusion is for the interest of each and all. It is not the least of the just claims that the American Revolution has upon the friends of liberty everywhere, that, while it terminated in the dismemberment of the British Empire, it left the English a

more free people than they would have been but for its occurrence. It settled for them more firmly the great safeguards of English liberty in the right of the habeas corpus, the trial by jury, and the great doctrine that representation must accompany taxation. We speak of it as the victory of Adams and Jefferson, but it was not less that of Chatham and Burke.

I should deem the war for the Union a failure, I should think the victory won by these men who have died in its defence barren, if it shall not prove in every larger sense won for the South as well as the North; if it shall not be shown that it is better for her that the contest against its rightful authority failed.

It is not to be expected that opinion will be changed by edicts, even when those edicts are maintained by force. The changes of opinion must be gradual, and must be the effect of that time which enables feeling to subside and the judgment to act. Already there are brave and reflecting men who fought against us who do not hesitate to acknowledge that the end was well for them as for us, and who look forward hopefully to better results than could have been expected from a Confederacy which, if it had been founded, would have been at the mercy of each individual State. Nor is there any one bold enough to say, now that the system of slavery is destroyed, he would raise a hand, or lift a finger, to replace it. That the cause for which they have suffered so much will still be dear to those who have fought for it, or with whom it is associated by tender and affectionate recollections of those whom they have loved, who have fallen in its defence, is to be expected.

To such sentiments and feelings it is a matter of indifference whether there is defeat or success. They would exist, indeed, even if the reason and judgment should concede the cause to have been unwise. Certainly, we ourselves, had the war for the Union failed, would not the less have believed it just and necessary, nor the less have honored the memory of those engaged in it. When results are accepted cordially, we can ask no more until the softening influences of time have done their work.

On the fields which were ploughed by the fierce artillery the wheat has been dancing fresh and fair in the breezes of the summer that is gone; and as the material evidences of the conflict pass away, so let each feeling of bitterness disappear, as together, both North and South, we strive to render the Republic one whose firm yet genial sway shall protect with just and equal laws each citizen who yields obedience to her power. Asking for ourselves no rights that we do not freely concede to others, demanding no restraints upon others that we do not readily submit to ourselves, yielding a generous obedience to the Constitution in all its parts, both new and old, let us endeavor to lift ourselves to that higher level of patriotism which despises any narrow sectionalism, and rejoices in a nationality broad enough to embrace every section of the Union, and each one of its people, whether high or humble, rich or poor, black or white.

There is no division to-day among the States of the Union such as existed when the Constitution was formed. In each and all the great principles of liberty and equal

rights are the same, to be alike respected as the only basis upon which the Government can stand. Whatever may have been the sorrows or the losses of the war, there is no sorrow that cannot find its recompense in the added grandeur and dignity of the whole country.

Comrades: —

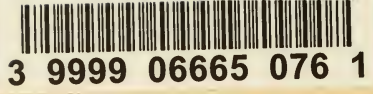
It is the last time that we, who have marched under the flag, and been the soldiers of the Union in its mortal struggle, shall gather in such numbers as meet to-day. We are an army to whom can come no recruits. The steady, resistless artillery of time hurls its deadly missiles upon us, and each hour we are fewer and weaker. But, as we stand together thus, as we remember how nobly and bravely life's work was done by these men whom we have sought to commemorate, let us believe that the tie which binds us to them, in a great and holy cause, is not wholly dissolved. Their worldly task is done, their solemn oath, which we took side by side with them, is performed. For us life brings each day its new duties and new responsibilities.

In the classic mythology, which was the religion of the ancient world, it was fabled that the heroes were demi-gods. Raised above the race of man, and yet not so far but their example might be imitated, they served to animate those who yet struggled with their mortal surroundings. So should these, our heroes, while the dust of life's conflict is yet on us, inspire us to loftier purposes and nobler lives. And, as we leave them to their glorious repose, and their pure and noble fame, let

us go forth exalted by these hours of communion with them.

Above them, as we depart, we utter the ancient form of words, and yet in no formal way, which conclude the proclamations of the State whose children they were: "God save the Commonwealth of Massachusetts!" And to this we add, with not less of fervor or solemnity, the prayer which was in their hearts, and upon their lips, as they died: "God save the Union of the American States!"





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